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ABSTRACT

Although massive efforts were undertaken in the 1960's to recruit and admit minority students to predominantly white institutions of higher education, the number of students successfully completing these programs has remained unchanged. To date, much effort has been spent in attempts to assess how such institutions might alter their current practices to better serve minority populations. It is asserted in this paper that such efforts are doomed to failure unless the processes by which minority students acclimate themselves and develop the skills needed to survive in an alien environment are examined. Models of competent functioning usually focus upon the individual, overlooking the importance of environmental factors in the shaping of adaptive or coping behavior. In a pilot research project described in this paper, the behaviors and attitudes characteristic of competent adaptation to the university are described in the context of total social climate. One hundred black and white undergraduates participated in the study which involved standardized measurement instruments, problem solving, and resource knowledge and utilization. The findings, which relate to positive and negative feedback, social networks, and the utilization of formal and informal resources are presented. Particular ways in which black students adapt to and survive in the predominantly white institutional environment are discussed. (Author/GC)

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Survival Skills: Social Climate and the Development of Adaptive Behavior in Black and White College Students

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Educators concerned about the fate of minority students in predominantly White settings frequently bemoan the "revolving-door" phenomenon that ensnares many students. Altough massive efforts have been undertaken during the 60's to recruit and admit minority students to institutions of higher education, the number of students successfully completing these programs has disappointingly remained unchanged. Instead, minority students admitted to these programs have dropped out at an alarmingly high rate. To date much effort has been spent in attempts to assess how such institutions might alter their current practices to better serve minority populations. Such efforts are doomed to failure unless we simultaneously examine the process by which successful minority students acclimate themselves to an alien environment and develop the skills needed to survive within that environment. Although the failure rates are unacceptably high we should not ignore the fact that many students do succeed. These students may provide a key to understanding the behavioral and cognitive sets which enhance the ability of a student to successfully meet the demands of such academic settings. Therefore, it appears worthwhile to pursue a course of investigation which will illuminate the behaviors and attitudes characteristic of competent adaptation to the University.

The following is an account of a pilot research project which sketches a number of dimensions relevant to adaptive behavior in Black and White students. In addition this research project assesses several dimensions of the University environment (social climate, resources, deficits) and ways that these environmental dimensions are related to patterns of adaptation. Environmental factors are important because they provide the stimulus conditions and context for adequate functioning. It is likely then that successful adaptation is dependent not only on the individual characteristics but on qualities of the setting as well.

Several investigators have developed models of coping which include relatively similar dimensions. Jahoda (1968) outlines a general model of coping that includes attitudes of the individual towards himself, the degree to which the person actualizes potential, views of the world around him, ability to take life as it comes. Tyler (1975) has characterized the competent individual as one who has a moderately high level of self-evaluation, feelings of personal efficacy, moderately high level of trust towards other people in establishing relationships in the world, and an active planful behavioral style by which one sets goals realistically and pursues them tenaciously. Wilcox (1973) further refines these models to have greater applicability for Blacks. His definition includes the following components:

1. Awareness that society is hostile toward Blacks.
2. Resistance to attempts by the larger society towards complete acculturation.

3. Ability to deal with those in White power structures even though from a position of presumed powerlessness.
4. Refusal to be abused or to abuse.
5. Active involvement in controlling one's own destinies (personal control).

These three models of competent functioning (Viz., Jahoda, Tyler, and Wilcox) suggest that critical factors in the effectively coping individual are related to a conviction about self worth or self esteem, feelings of personal control over one's own life combined with the realization of the attitude of benign neglect or active hostility on the part of powerful others who also control one's life. Behaviorally, these models depict the effectively coping individual as active, planful, and persistent in shaping his environment and pursuing goals. For Blacks there appear to be the added dimension of awareness of role of powerful others in one's life. The development of these models represent very useful contribution to the understanding of effective coping. However, since they focus primarily on the individual, individual skills and attitudes, they overlook the important contribution made by the environment in the shaping of adaptive or coping behavior. Therefore, these models of competence might be further refined by including in the equation some assessment of the environment in which the coping behavior occurs. There is a growing body of literature (Endler, 1973, Ekehammer, 1974) that suggest that the individual-environment interaction is a better predictor of behavior than either alone. This literature provides persuasive

evidence that the effectiveness of coping behavior can be judged best within a specific context. Therefore, attempts to delineate a configuration of effective coping or competence might be improved by including environmental assessment. Moos (1973) has outlined several dimensions of environments that are relevant to individual behavior: a) ecological dimensions, b) behavior settings, c) organizational structure, d) personal and behavioral characteristics of the millieu inhabitants, e) psycho-social characteristics, and f) organizational climate. These dimensions were analyzed and further reduced to three: 1) relationship or interpersonal characteristics; 2) personal development or goal related; and 3) system maintenance and change dimensions which relates to how the organization or environment is organized and controlled. The relationship dimension assesses the extent to which individuals "are involved, and support and help each other." The personal development dimension refers to "the basic directions along which personal development and enhancement tend to occur." In an educational institution this dimension would refer to academically related elements of the environment, especially, achievement. Systems maintenance and system change dimensions might refer to resources available or perceived deficits that make functioning possible or difficult, as well as pathways for altering the current balance between resources and deficits. A pervasive dimension cutting across both the interpersonal and personal development dimensions is the sutble evaluative feedback students receive from the University environment regarding their acceptability and current performance. The system feedback dimension as measured in this study represents the perceptions

of students as to how well they are treated at the University and their affective reactions to being there. In summary, then, this social climate representing the relationship, personal development and system maintenance dimensions are a critical part of evaluating the environment and its relationship to the development of coping behavior. It is only by examing both individual attitudes and skills combined with an assessment of the environment in which they are utilized that we can understand the development of effective coping behavior.

Problem Statement

If we hope to enhance the development of competent functioning of Black students in predominantly White settings we must understand a) what coping skills may be unique to Blacks, b) how the development of competent functioning interacts with environmental conditions, c) and in what way the competence configuration of self perceptions, world attitudes and behavioral styles constitute a precise and complete statement about competence in an academic setting. An important aspect of this task is to determine which components are predictive of an actively involved style as well as full utilization of resources available in the environment.

Method

Subjects

Fifty-six White and forty-four Black undergraduate students at the University of Maryland volunteered to participate in this experiment. The average age of the subjects is 19.7 years and the average time spent at the university was 2.3 years. Volunteers

were recruited from undergraduate psychology, sociology and Afro-American studies courses.

Procedure

All participants were asked to attend group sessions at which they completed the following measures:

(a) Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, a one-hundred item measure examining several aspects of self evaluation from academic behavior to personal social behavior. This measure yields a total score, a self criticism score and eight other subscale scores;

(b) Van Slaumbrock System Control Scale, which measures the extent to which individuals attribute control over their lives to larger political or social systems;

(c) The Levinson I-E, a locus of control scale which yields three subscales scores measuring the extent to which control of behavior is attributed to self, chance, or powerful others;

(d) Social Climate Scale, a measure of perceptions students hold of four social climate dimensions at the university. These dimensions are interpersonal, academic, service, and system feedback. (See Table 2 for items that make up these dimensions);

(e) Coping Skills, a measure of coping skills was developed based on a model of community competence proposed by Iscoe (1974). This model proposes two processes as critical to coping: problem solving and resource knowledge and utilization.

Problem Solving

A set of five problems typically faced by students was developed. These problems covered academic, financial, health, and administrative areas. For example, the student is asked what he would do if the school raised tuition to a level he could not afford or if he were assigned a paper with a rapidly approaching deadline and had made little progress. Responses were scored for style (extent of active involvement in solving the problem), the types of resources used, and the locus of blame for the problem.

Resources; Knowledge and Utilization

In this subsection the student is asked about several resources provided by the university. They are asked whether they know what services are provided, personnel provides services, and about their use and evaluation of these services. The resources included in this section are the financial aid office, the departmental offices, the counseling center, the health center, the information desk, and the minority student program office.

Results

Items from the Social Climate measure were combined and mean scores were computed. Subject averaging higher than 4.0 were categorized as negative, those scoring lower than 4.0 as positive. This breakdown resulted in 28 White and 13 Black positive climate subjects and 28 White and 31 Black negative climate subjects. All subsequent ANOVA were carried out using race and social climate (feedback) as classifying variables.

In response to the question what is the impact of negative environmental feedback on a competence configuration of self perception, world views, and behaviroal styles, several interesting patterns emerge. First there is a significant correlation between self concept or self esteem and feedback for Blacks. Perception of the environment as providing negative feedback is related to low levels of self esteem. This means that the more negatively one is viewed by the environment, the more negatively one tends to perceive oneself. This relationship does not however hold up for Whites. In addition, perception of negative feedback from the environment is also associated with lower feelings of personal self efficacy, that is when one feels that the environment is disparaging one tends to feel that one has less control over things that occurs in one's life. Again this relationship seems unique to Blacks because it does not hold true for Whites. High levels of negative feedback from the environment do not appear to be related to world views inasmuch as Blacks in both positive and negative social climate conditions tended to attribute control over their lives to powerful others and did so to a greater extent than Whites did. This suggests, that perception of racism or the hostility-alienation in the environment is a very real factor independent of the quality of feedback that one receives.

Social Climate

Using the three categories of social climates outlined above, academic, interpersonal and service related, there were configural

differences between Blacks in the high negative feedback condition and those in the low negative feedback condition. Those who perceived the University environment as highly negative felt most pressed by academic deficits followed by service and interpersonal. Blacks in the positive climate condition felt most pressed by University deficits related to services. Specifically, Blacks cited the following as the greatest sources of stress in the University environment: 1) poor advisement, 2) high cost, 3) racism, 4) large classes. The same pattern obtained with regard to University resources and strengths. The positive climate group were able to cite more strengths than the negative climate group and to no surprise Whites cited significantly more than Blacks. It is interesting to note the specific strengths Blacks pointed to in describing the University. Most frequently Blacks indicated that they saw no strengths at all. The next most frequently cited strength was the large variety of course selections followed by the large number of people with who to interact and the convenience of its location. Generally when Blacks talked about <u>people</u> at the University they thought in terms of other Blacks rather than the University at large. When asked to elaborate on their responses Black students indicated that if they reported liking other students or characterized University students as helpful and supportive they were referring to other Black students. These responses highligted the perspective that Blacks have of the University, namely, a Black enclave nested within the larger predominantly White University. The accuracy of this discription is supported by observation of the restricted formal

and informal interactions across racial groups that occur in the University.

Problem Solving

Negative feedback from the environment did not appear to affect significantly the style of problem solving. Blacks in both the positive and negative social climate condition did not differ on problem solving. Nor was there significant effect on race for this dimension. However there was a significant Race x Feedback interaction indicating that Blacks in the positive condition were much more active problem solvers than Whites in the positive condition. The absence of environmental sources of stress may have been facilitative of problem solving in Blacks by may act in the opposite manner for Whites. Generally, the more deficits or problems students perceived, the more active they were in finding solutions for their problems. In the case of Blacks, however, the lack of stress or lack of problems does not appear to be related to lower levels of activity. Students who experienced a high level of stress tended to blame the University more than students who experienced a relatively lower level of stress. This was true both for Blacks and for Whites. In attempting to solve problems, Blacks surprisingly tended to rely more on formal rather than informal or self-generated resources. This was unexpected in view of the commonly held belief that Blacks tend to refrain from use of services provided by the University. This finding, though tentative, runs contrary to the widely used prescriptions for aiding minority students which are

based on the notion that these student know little about and rarely use such services. It is more likely that our students utilized these services at about the same proportion as other students but are expected to use them at a much higher level since they are viewed by others as "more needy." This explanation leaves unanswered the question, why should Blacks more frequently than Whites cite formal resources when they attempt to solve problems they encounter a likely explanation is that Blacks in this sample are drawn from poor and lower middle class families. Consequently they may have fewer alternative resources available through family or friends than many Whites students may have. Thus Blacks more inclined to make use of those which are available. But, the high utilization of University resources places Blacks in an unusual dilemma of having to use resources whose agents are viewed with cautiousness and occasionally suspicion.

A fine grain analysis of the specific formal resources actually used indicates that Blacks who perceive the social climate as negative are less inclined to use formal resources such as the provost's office or counseling center than those who view the social climate as positive. On the other hand the former are more likely to know about and use student-operated services or those designated specifically for minority students. This trend lends further support to the Black Enclave notion, i.e., Blacks expecially those in the negative climate group feel alienated from the mainstream of the University and consequently construct their own supportive networks within the University setting.

The effect of social climate on the Conpetence Configuration

(self evaluation, world view and behavioral style) is not clear cut. For Blacks there is tentative support for the existence of a relationship between social climate and self esteem. Perception of the environment as stressful, threatening, or otherwise negatively disposed toward oneself is associated with low self esteem. It is not possible to determine causality in this instance but additional investigation is warranted. For Blacks effective functioning in the University setting is best predicted by locus of control. Those individuals who are simultaneously high on belief about self efficacy and convinced that powerful others also excercise control over their lives tend to be more active problem solvers. These results are consistent with the findings of Shorter (1975) and they suggest that to be effective-adapters, Blacks must have a keen sense of their own effectiveness as individuals yet, posess a realistic assessment of the influence that powerful others hold. The best predictors of resource utilization in Blacks is the level of self esteem, perceptions of system control and the quality of the social climate. Those who are most likely to fully use resources in their environment have a moderately high level of self esteem, perceive the environment and climate as positive, and recognize the high level of control that systems posess over what happens in their lives. This suggests that the focus of attempts to increase problem solving and resource utilization should be directed towards enhancing the level of self esteem and perceptions of the University environment. To accomplish this it may be important to help students work through the inclusion-exclusion issue for it is difficult to be a part of a system and not to be at the same time. It is also

important to recognize and strengthen informal support networks that exists among Black students. This network may be the most effective means for giving Black students a sense of control over their lives and a belief that the environment will in some way be responsive to their personal needs.

Table 1

Design: Social Climate, Self Evaluation and Coping in Black and White College Students

Independent Variables

- Race (Black vs. White)
- Social Climate (positive vs. negative)

Intervening Variables

- Self Perception - Tenn. Self Concept Scale
  - Total Score
  - Self Criticism
  - Levinson IE
    - Individual Control
    - Chance Control
    - Powerful Others
    - System Control
- Environmental Perceptions - Social Climate Measure
  - Achievement Need (academic)
  - Service Needs
  - Affective or Interpersonal Needs

Dependent Variables

Adaptation

- Problem Solving - Style
  - Resource
  - Locus
- Resource Utilization
- Evaluation of Resources
- Level of Activitity - Number of organizations in which individual participates
  - Channels of Communication
- Achievement - Grade Point Average
- Quality of Community - Satisfaction Rating
  - Community Support
  - Community Deficits
  - Community Resources

Table 2

Social Climate Measure Items grouped by subscale

Subscales:

1. Interpersonal Climate (Relationship Dimension)
   (a) apathy of students
   (b) lack of social activities
   (c) unfriendly atmosphere
   (d) little personal contact with teachers
   (e) too many clics
   (f) prejudice
   (g) no one cares about me
   (h) no one ever listens
   (i) little privacy
2. Academic Climate (Personal Development Dimension)
   (a) dull courses
   (b) students are too competitive
   (c) quality of teaching is poor
   (d) little personal contact with teachers
3. Service Climate (System Maintenance and System Change)
   (a) lack of tutorials
   (b) too great an emphasis on varsity sport
   (c) lack of adequate physical facilities
   (d) poor library services
   (e) inadequate services
4. System Feedback (Relationship Dimension and Personal Development)
   (a) professors too critical

Table A (continued)

4. System Feedback (continued)

(b) always told that you are doing poorly

(c) feeling uncomfortable in the setting

(d) feeling depressed in the setting

(e) feel like make the wrong choice of schools

(f) feel unwanted

(g) receives little respect for self as a person

(h) administration fail to respond to students

table 3.
Measures

Self Perception

1. Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS) is a well standardized measure of self-evaluation which contains 100 items pertaining to social, ethical, family, personal, physical aspects of self. The TSCS employs a 5-point Likert scale yielding a Total-score which represents the level of positive self evaluation and a self criticism score which represents the extent to which an individual is willing to acknowledge failings or to admit to unfavorable things about self.

2. Levinson Personal Control - one of the three scales yield by the Levinson Control Scale. It contains 8 items using a 6-point Likert scale measuring the extent to which an individual feels that he is personally responsible for and has control over the events and effects of his life.

Environmental Perceptions

3. Social Climate Scale - This is a 25-item designed to measure perception of the University environment with respect to interpersonal academic or service dimensions. Respondents using a 7-point Likert scale indicate to what extent an item presents a problem for them at the University. (See Table 1). This scale yields a total score and four subscale scores
   a) interpersonal climate -- 9 items measuring the quality and nature of social interactions on campus
   b) academic - 4 items measuring the problems associated with environmental presses for achievement.
   c) services - 5 items measuring the extent to which the quantity of university services is perceived as a problem
   d) system feedback - 7 items measuring the subtle reactions to student perceptions of how the university as a systems views and treats him.

4. Community Deficits - An open ended question in which participants are asked to list what they consider to be the three most important problems or needs not being adequately met by the University.

5. Community Resources - An open ended question in which participants are asked to list what they consider to be the things they like best about the University.

6. Community Support - a 7-point rating of the extent to which students perceive other student feels satisfied at the University.

7. Community Satisfaction - a 7-point rating of the extent to which the student feels satisfied at the University.

8. Powerful Others - an 8-item subscale of the Levinson which measures the extent to which control over one's behavior is in the hands of powerful people.

World View

9. Chance Control - a 7-item from the Levinson using 6-point Likert scale measuring the extent to which an individual attributes control over his behavior to chance happenings or fate.

10. Van Slaumbrack - System Control Scale, a 13-item forced choice scale to measure the extent to which one sees small people as having some influence over the course of political events as opposed to an elite and powerful minority.

Adaptive Behavior

11. Problem-solving - an open ended format was used to solicit solutions to five problems posing academic, financial, interpersonal, mental health dilemma. Responses were coded for style, quality of resources and locus of blame.
Style - a 4-point rating scale was used to designate the level of personal involvement in solving the problem.
Resource - a 4-point scale designating the quality of resources used in the solution. The dimension rated was formal-informal-self related.
Locus of Blame - a 3-point rating scale was used to indicate the extent to which the problem was defined as an indivudal vs system problem.

12. Resource Utilization Index - Six resources generally available at the University were presented (Health Services, Departmental office, Counseling Center, Library, Chaplains). Participants were asked to indicate whether they knew of the services; its location, its personnel and whether they had used it. Positive responses to these four questions were summed and averaged across the 6 services to yield an index of utilization. In addition, participants were asked to evaluate each service.

All 100 participants took the above measures in one-hour group sessions. Subjects were later classified by race and whether they fell above or below 4.0 on the negative feedback scale.

Figure 1

Environmental deficits. Mean ratings of University environment deficits categorized by academic service and interpersonal areas